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AUTHOR Sansregret, Marthe
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ABSTRACT

A rationale for the recognition of prior learning is first based on the fact that learning experientially may be as necessary as learning through theory. One basis for the rationale is that adults in everyday life may have to acquire skills that belong to three domains: psychomotor, cognitive, and affective. Furthermore, the rationale supports the fact that recognizing adults' prior learning would enable adults to get a diploma that could bring opportunities for employment, promotion, and training. Adults would also be in a better position to give new directions to their lives. Academic institutions see for themselves the benefits in recognizing adults' prior learning. Institutions could maintain their role of assessors and guarantee the reliability and validity of assessment. By positioning people where they can maximize their potential, academic institutions make an important economic contribution through making a better use of monies available for education. Faculty are challenged and gain a renewed prestige when they become intellectual leaders and political and cultural consultants. This rationale is subject to the proper implementation of a program that includes students' careful preparation, done with the assistance of a counselor, and students' assessment, carried out by experts using the proper method. (YLB)

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A RATIONALE FOR ASSESSING ADULT'S PRIOR LEARNING

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Marthe Sansregret, ed.d. lecturer
Andragogy Department
Université de Montréal
Montréal, Québec, Canada

INTRODUCTION

For the past decades, the life of adults has been characterized by numerous changes. Adults work, study, volunteer and travel according to a life plan and these activities are blended and can happen at any time in a day.

During any of these activities, adults are exposed to learning which is becoming an integral part of their life. Society at large has now entered in a lifelong learning process that contributes to transforming their lives : "Lifelong learning is a total worldwide movement which is both reflecting and contributing to social transformation ..." (Boucouvalas, 1983). The many changes that result from this transformation point out the need to learn what is immediately important for a given situation, practice being sometimes as important as theory.

In order to cope with those changes, adults do learn, outside the academic milieu, valuable skills that could have a content equal to academic learning. But at the same time, they experience the difficulty

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of having this learning by doing properly assessed, especially when they have to prove to others the quality of what they know and are able to do.

Academic institutions are also experiencing the impact of the social changes and do not always know which direction to take, since the traditional way they have of doing things for decades, is not always structured to integrate new methods of teaching and assessing. They often wish to recognize prior learning, but when the time comes to give proper response, they want to examine various reasons why they should assess learning acquired outside their supervision.

Regardless of the country where this process takes place, recognizing prior learning is always a matter of dual partnership : the adult, on one side, and the institutions on the other. Both have specific needs, adults feeling they deserve a fair treatment and institutions evaluating the best reasons why they should respond to adult's request.

A proper rationale would therefore look at the nature of prior learning and then, at the reasons why the two partners feel it should be recognized officially and at the basic conditions to make the project valid and reliable.

NATURE OF PRIOR LEARNING

By prior learning, we mean learning that is acquired outside the supervision of faculty and therefore, a learning that happens at work,

during volunteer activities, in the home, while traveling, etc. It is not only listening to news, watching events, talking about a subject or memorizing a text, but it is rather something that can be demonstrated to others, under varying circumstances with a specific quality. It involves knowing, doing and also being. It is also called non traditional learning since it usually happens outside the traditional academic milieu.

Throughout history, learning by doing or by trial and error, has been the initial approach to learning. People everywhere in the world have been learning from their parents, teachers, neighbours, religious and political leaders, etc. They have tried by themselves to cope with the reality of life, on a day-to-day basis. Social changes have forced adults to make several adjustments, as their needs change too, in order to cope, to continue on living and to satisfy their developmental needs.

These changes have put forward, again, the importance of learning through experience, research and practices have proven that in order for people to adapt, they often need to learn through both, theory and practice.

To better understand learning through experience (prior), Fry and Kolb (1979) explained that people who have developed theories, often started with practice to experiment, observe, conceptualize and experiment again. Once the results of their practice have reached a

level of satisfaction, their theory may be used by others, it secures different beliefs, garantees results or outcomes and it can also save time, energy and money. Moreover, a good theory can allow several individuals or groups to move further on.

According to Coleman (19..), theory is not the only valuable way to learn, since there are two possible learning styles: theory and practical experience. Some people learn better from experience (doing and acting); then they apply what they have learned to specific situations, and once the task is completed they understand the broader principles. Other people learn the general principles first, preferably from reading and taking courses, and then apply these principles to specific situations. The latter has been called the traditional way which is the raison d'être of our academic institutions.

But the reality of life requires to review the values of learning and to reconsider, in the light of social changes, the possibilities for adults to learn by means that seem to be appropriate for a given situation. Therefore, the recognition of prior learning would mean that formal education recognizes the fact that an adult or a younger student may have learned something valuable outside the academic milieu.

This can be best explained by the fact that during the course of life, adults acquire skills belonging to three different domains : psychomotor, cognitive and affective.

For example, a doctor needs to master manual skills for injections or other treatments. Then he/she needs to know the terminology (memory), to update his/her knowledge in order to adapt to new medications, write reports about patients etc. The third domain of skills refers to his/her capacity to listen to a patient's needs and to judge and make a good interpretation using affective skills.

The same rationale applies to, for example, the case of an engineer specializing in ventilation. He needs to draw plans (psychomotor), to calculate (cognitive) and to decide of the impact of his calculations on pollution (affective). The responsibility he takes is derived from his affective skills and without them, he could well decide to ignore completely the problem of pollution, limiting his responsibility to the drawing board and to the calculations to produce cooler air.

The recognition of prior learning brings us to reconsider our usual way of assessing the quality of knowledge by looking at the three domains of learning which make a person competent, knowledgeable and sensitive to the needs of others. This can be best explained by looking at the different skills expected from knowledgeable and thoughtful person, making a difference between a competent person and a less competent one.

The following table illustrates the skills of the three groups.

LEARNING FROM PSYCHOMOTOR DOMAIN*

1. REFLEX MOVEMENTS : those movements which are involuntary in nature.

2. BASIC-FUNDAMENTAL MOVEMENTS : those inherent movement patterns which form the basis for specialized complex skills movements.

3. PERCEPTUAL ABILITIES : all of the learner's modalities where stimuli impinge upon him to be carried to the higher brain centers for interpretation.

4. PHYSICAL ABILITIES : those functional characteristics of organic vigor which, when developed, provide the learner with a sound, efficiently functioning instrument to be used when making skilled movements a part of his movement repertoire.

5. SKILLED MOVEMENTS : result of the acquisition of a degree of efficiency in performing a complex movement task.

6. NON DISCURSIVE COMMUNICATION : classification level composed of behaviors which can be labeled forms of movement communication.

* Adapted from Harrow, A Taxonomy of the Psychomotor Domain, 1972.

LEARNING FROM COGNITIVE DOMAIN*

1. KNOWLEDGE : those behaviors and test situations which emphasize the remembering either by recognition or recall ideas, material or phenomena.

2. COMPREHENSION : depending on the possession of the requisite or the relevant knowledge; those objectives, behaviors or responses which represent an understanding of the literal message contained in a communication.

3. APPLICATION : using abstraction correctly, given an appropriate situation in which no mode of solution is specified.

4. ANALYSIS : searching for elements of a subject field.

5. SYNTHESIS : putting together elements and parts to form a whole.

6. EVALUATION : making of judgment about the value for some purpose of ideas, works, solutions, methods, materials, etc.

* Adapted from Bloom et al., Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook 1, Cognitive Domain, 1956.

LEARNING FROM AFFECTIVE DOMAIN *

1. RECEIVING (ATTENDING) : that the learner be sensitized to the existence of certain phenomena and stimuli; that he be willing to receive or to attend to them.

2. RESPONDING : that the learner be concerned with responses which go beyond merely attending to the phenomenon.

3. VALUING : that a thing, phenomenon or behavior has worth.

4. ORGANIZATION : That the learner begins the building of a value system.

5. CHARACTERIZATION BY A VALUE OR A VALUE COMPLEX : that the learner has unique personal characteristics and his own philosophy of life or world view.

N.B. : Formal education does not emphasizes this level. (See Krathwohl, Bloom et Masia).

* Adapted from Krathwohl et al., Taxonomy of Educational Objectives : Handbook 2, Affective Domain, 1964.

From Sansregret, Marthe. Recognition of Prior Learning Series : Roles and Tasks of Administrators, Counselors and Assessors, HMH Hurtubise Ltée, Montréal, 1987.

The first taxonomy (psychomotor) is fairly easy to understand, and we see how much refinement can exist in manual skills, taking for instance a doctor's ability to administer some treatments.

The second taxonomy shows very well the use of memory as the first level of cognitive skills, and the attainment of higher levels. This taxonomy brings us to reconsider our way of admitting adults solely on the basis of their ability to memorise a text or other principles, or to answer multiple choice exams instead of having to explain what they know about a specific topic. This process questions our actual admission requirements, for example in a faculty of medecine; if only potential medical students who demonstrate good cognitive skills are admitted, neglecting students who have reached a high level of skills in the affective domain, the department might be faced with a deficient graduating class. If we consider that the medical prepares for a career where empathy and human values are as important to the patient as the treatment itself, it then becomes important to look at the three domains.

If we look at Krathwohl's affective skills, we discover that the highest level of affective skills is usually learned outside the school, meaning during the course of life.

Since the highest level of values is not always attained through formal education, the first rationale to recognize prior learning would be the necessity to assess the complete range of skills and abilities

needed from a full human being, meaning the entire potential a person has to live according to his own developmental needs and the societal needs.

Once we have accepted the fact that people can acquire academic skills both from theory and from practice, we can look at the reasons why it becomes so important for schools to recognize that learning.

REASONS WHY ADULTS WANT THEIR KNOWLEDGE TO BE ASSESSED

Many adults have seen the course of their every day life change in a way they cannot always control. Technology has invaded not only the offices but private homes as well. It has suggested, and sometimes imposed, new ways of thinking and doing. But, there is still only 24 hours in a day, and people will always need to sleep, work, and fulfill responsibilities as adults before they can spend some time for leisure and other activities. Then, what happens ? Resistance or adaptation. Should an adult decide to adapt, it will mean to acquire a certain number of skills needed to continue on living that day and the others to come.

Thus, everyday, adults create their own response and the learning outcomes could be of academic quality, depending on the kind of person they are and on many other c[illegible]nstantial or substantial factors.

A study of over 200 research papers, published by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, New Directions for Experiential Learning

and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education on the recognition of prior learning, revealed that adults sometimes feel that they should have the range of their skills assessed because they need a diploma.

A diploma is still the passport that opens doors to new jobs for adults who are seriously questioning job security. A diploma constitutes an entry in a new country, gives future employers an idea of the level of competence an adult can demonstrate in a job. A diploma also positions an employee at a certain level in the scale of working possibilities; it helps the individual to know himself more, having references about the things he has done and the other things he can still do with proper training.

With all these changes, adults become confused and their priorities are unclear. This uncertainty in their daily activities constitutes the second reason why they want their prior learning assessed. They hope to have a global view of who they are, where their knowledge stand and in which direction they would like to be heading. Knowing better who they are, they would feel more secure to look at their career and at what they want to do with their lives. Also, because of many social changes, adults tend to loose their motivation having to live very often with this confusion. The assessment of their prior learning would help them find a new orientation and give a new meaning to their life (Chickering, 1983).

REASONS WHY ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS WISH TO RECOGNIZE PRIOR LEARNING

Academic institutions have also to adapt to those changes and they tend to recognize adult's prior learning for three main reasons.

Since people can learn many things readily useable in their job, from just about anywhere, confusion may grow and the validity of assessment of knowledge and competence may be endangered. Academic institutions wish to guarantee the validity and the reliability of accreditation at a time when the providers of education are numerous (employers, the state, voluntary services and others). "Employers are increasingly involved in education, conducting on-the-job training for employees, workshops for professionals, and think-tanks for executives" (Cross, 1981, p.21).

Because of the new providers of education, and of a decreasing number of admissions among younger students, academic institutions feel threatened both by competition and by declinining enrollment which could have a detrimental impact on their revenue. They see in the recognition of prior learning the possibility to improve their financial situation. They can add to their normal clientele hundreds of adults who need to return to school to satisfy developmental beeds, and to reassure employers who still believe in academic credibility, even though, we sadly have to admit, it has lost some of its prestigious power.

The financial consideration of schools is different in the 1980s, but at the same time, the value of education has not lost of its importance. Academic institutions should take into consideration, that in having their learning assessed, adults would be willing to pay since the advantages would far outweigh the costs. Therefore, institutions would be in a position to offer more services and to reconsider economic advantages in the light of better educated people contributing to the economic growth of the country.

Faculty have often lost their primary motivation of teaching and assessing because of the changes brought in to their roles and tasks; they often end up with duties that have little or no meaning to them.

In some countries, the work of assessing the learning in a specific field of expertise has been delegated to third parties; for example, multiple choice exams are prepared by organizations or people over which faculty have no control. Their judgment has been replaced by so-called magic and quick answers from anonymous questionnaires that are supposed to tell whether a student is knowledgeable in a particular field or not.

In assessing prior learning, faculty would get a new challenge and probably reintegrate their formal role as educators and assessors of learning.

INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT IS THE KEY

It appears to be in the interests of adult students as well as in the interests of academic institutions to recognize prior learning.

Nevertheless, because of the complexity and of the importance of the changes around us, and because of the variety of learnings that may result from these changes, this rationale is dependent upon an adequate preparation of adult students to identify their prior learning and upon the utilization of proper methods of assessment individually designed according to the nature of the learning (Sansregret, 1987a).

The condition to make this new assessment system work properly would be for the adults to be adequately prepared for the assessment process. Because of the numerous and various skills adults can acquire through time, they do not always know the level of their competence.

It is important for them to make a clear inventory of what they already know and are able to do. From this inventory, they build a study program tailored to their requirements and needs (Sansregret, 1987b). This preparation is done through the development of a portfolio, which has been advocated in the United States, since the mid-seventies, as the favoured means for presenting one's knowledge to assessors. It has also been approved by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). It is the preferred technique to prepare an adult to have his/her skills

assessed properly (Knapp, 1977; Forrest, 1977; Knapp, 1981; Menson, 1982) and it includes various ways of assessing, among others the standardized tests.

The development of a portfolio is done with the assistance of a counselor who has the responsibility to help students review their life and work experience, identify their career and educational objectives, identify and verify their prior learning and its correspondance to credit courses, build their educational program. Normally, a course on Portfolio Development is found to be so helpful and so enriching for students, that it is, more often than not, credited by universities and colleges (Sansreget, 1987).

Once the portfolio has been completed, it is sumbitted to those faculty who normally teach in the discipline to be assessed and for which students request official recognition. Outside experts are invited by faculty and administrators when their expertise improves the assessment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that a rationale to recognize prior learning is based first on the fact that learning experientially may be necessary as well as learning through theory, because both types of learning can be important for adults who have to cope with social changes.

It is based on the fact that adults in everyday life may have to acquire skills that belong to three domains : psychomotor, cognitive and affective. Everyone of these categories of skills may be needed, depending on the very nature of the learning to be acquired at a specific time.

That rationale supports the fact that to recognize adult's prior learning would mean for adults to get a diploma that could bring opportunities for employment, promotion and training. It would also mean for adults to give new directions to their life. By having an appraisal of their competence, they will be in a better position to build projects for the future.

Academic institutions see for themselves the benefits that exist in recognizing adults' prior learning. Among those benefits, they could maintain their role of assessors and guarantee the reliability and validity of assessment.

By making a better use of monies available for education, they would then bring an important economic contribution in positioning people at the place where they can maximize their potential.

A third reason would be to give faculty a new challenge (Taylor, 1982), and renewed prestige at a time when they could become intellectual leaders, as well as political and cultural consultants (Keeton, 1982).

This rationale is subject to the proper implementation of a program that includes student's careful preparation, done with the assistance of a counselor, and by the notion that assessment is carried out by experts in the field, using the proper method available for the learning to be assessed.

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